

WHO AM I TO SAY? THE STORY OF MARCUS ELRON'S EXXON AND THE TABACO COMMUNITY OF COLOMBIA

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“My task, which I am trying to achieve... is by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel – it is before all to make you see. That –and no more, and it is everything” (Joseph Conrad’s *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, 1897/1914: Preface).

I

It is 7 o’clock on a Tuesday morning. The family German Sheppard called Robin is barking with excitement. Apparently, the dog has just seen a snake crawling under some of the exotic palm trees in the garden. It is a big garden, where a small South American rainforest has been recreated for the owners of rancho *los novios* (the wedding couple) outside Houston, Texas. The dog’s barking has slightly distracted Marcus from his usual morning breakfast and his daily reading of the Houston Business Journal. The dog has also awoken, Angelina, Marcus’s teenage daughter, who moans and gets out of bed to get a glass of milk. In the kitchen, she does not talk to Marcus, as she knows that her father does not like to be disturbed while he reads the morning business news with details of his company performance at home and abroad. She gets her milk and goes back to her bedroom to get ready for school. It is 7.15 and the dog has stopped barking. By now, everyone in the house is awake and ready to begin his or her usual daily activities.

Marcus Elron, a senior executive at Exxon, one of the largest corporations in the world, owns *los novios*. There he lives with his family. Doris, his wife, works at the Hispano-American museum in Houston. She works there as a hobby to keep up her interest in Latin American culture that she acquired while living in Colombia with her husband and children. Angelina, like most teenage girls, goes to High School. Marcus’s twin sons, Mat and Bill, do not live at home anymore as both pursue their studies at universities in other states. Mat is studying finance and accountancy, following his father footsteps. Bill, on the other hand, studies philosophy and Spanish because he wants to go back to South America where his life was transformed by what he experienced in Tabaco, Colombia.

It is almost 8.00 by now so Marcus is ready to leave his beautiful comfortable home and drive to work. Teresa the maid, a Colombian illegal immigrant, has just arrived to begin sweeping floors and making beds. Angelina is rushing to catch her school bus while Doris calls Teresa to bring her coffee and toast. Doris is always the last to leave home.

II

It is 7 o'clock on a Tuesday morning in Tamaquitos, Colombia. The Guraya family is packing rapidly their few possessions. Today they are going to be evicted by the police from their scruffy house in this northern Colombian department of *La Guajira* where the world largest open pit coal mine, *El Cerrejon Norte*, operates. The mine owners, an international consortium consisting of British multinationals Anglo-American and BHP-Billiton, and the Swiss company Glencore, have been pushing for the eviction of this community. For the Guraya family, Gonzalo, Marta and their children, Remedios, Manuel and Carmen, this commotion brings painful memories of the forceful expulsion they experienced from their home in Tabaco, two years ago. There, like in other communities such as Sarahita, families were dragged out from their houses, which were then demolished under police supervision. Now, without much work; without public transportation, education, health services or sufficient food and, surrounded by mining operations that prevent them from moving freely in what used to be their land, the family does not know where to turn or where to go.

Gonzalo and his family are members of the Wayuu people. This is the largest indigenous group in Colombia. They are characterised by a distinct culture, language and ethnicity. Wayuu people form family based clans, whose identity and territory are determined by the location of their ancestors' bones. For instance, if someone removes their burial sites, it disrupts entirely their social organisation, relationships and way of life.

So, Gonzalo was in pain that morning. He did not know how to explain his children again that they had to move with the uncertainty of not knowing where they were going to be re-located this time or for how long. The filthy environment and displacement policy created in the zone since Exxon's subsidiary Intercor took over the mine in 1980 left him to realise that, this time, his land, his community, and his culture were gone.

Before his children were born, he had been evicted with his parents and clan from *Media Luna*, where the company constructed port of *Puerto Bolivar* and the station of the company's railway to transport the coal. Then, his parents who were farmers like him, agree to move their homes, farms and burials to a nearby location. After a few years his family was asked to move again. Whoever refused was fenced off, surrounded with armed guards and harassed.

At the time a new management team was sent there by Exxon to supervise and protect the company business activities under the direction of Marcus Elron.

III

It is 7 o'clock on a Tuesday evening in Kingston, England. In the quietest time at our homes and connected through the web we are putting together this fictional story in which we want to reflect how an organisation can manufacture and fix its identity by projecting a superficial image embedded in *simulacra* of his moral *persona*. The multi-masked illusion that Exxon projects by having sold its part of *Cerrejon Norte*, is a way distancing itself from any moral

responsibility. This is something generally practiced by other multinational organisations in the world. Projecting a *Quixotesque* image of itself as an organisation working for the good of the world through the responsible work done by its members.

We want to take a radical *Boejean* approach to explore this issue by avoiding the usual jargon that we use to describe and interpret our management/organisation analysis. We think, the power of the story and, an academic activism from our part, may communicate with richer language not just a mere interpretation of the story for subsequent epistemological debate but an open dialogue among authors and readers of this work. Following Bakhtin/Vološinov (1973: 86):

“A **story** is a bridge thrown between myself and other. If one end depends on me (the author), the other depends on my addressee (the reader).”